

Jan Vansina Remembered

Crafting Early African Histories with Jan Vansina

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Abstract: The introduction explores the ways in which Jan Vansina wrote Africa's earlier history. It argues that he overturned paradigmatic knowledge in part through policing boundaries between disciplines, but always in search of new knowledge. The boundaries enclosed different kinds of labor in producing evidence about the past. Each kind of labor teaches the scholar something about place, responsibility, and imagination. These afterlives of working in Africa informed Vansina's interdisciplinarian publishing strategies, shape-shifting them into the imaginative, and prompting new generations of scholars to chart their own paths.

Résumé: Cette introduction explore les différentes manières utilisées par Jan Vansina pour écrire l'histoire ancienne de l'Afrique. Elle montre que, tout en continuant sa quête de nouveaux savoirs, Vansina a bouleversé connaissances et paradigmes en redéfinissant les frontières entre les disciplines. Ces nouvelles frontières définissaient le contour de différents types de méthodologie dans la production de savoirs sur le passé. Chaque type de méthodologie enseigne ainsi au chercheur quelque chose sur le lieu, la responsabilité et l'imagination. Ces dimensions supplémentaires de son travail en Afrique ont éclairé les stratégies de publication interdisciplinaires de Vansina, en les rendant créatives, incitant ainsi les nouvelles générations de chercheurs à tracer leur propre voie.

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Introduction

Professor Jan Vansina passed away in February 2017, at his home, surrounded by his family.¹ His colleagues, including many former students, and other scholars influenced by his writing and teaching, agreed it would be valuable to create open forums at the 2017 African Studies Association Annual Meetings to discuss critically his scholarly legacy. Of the four Roundtables organized with Neil Kodesh (History, University of Wisconsin-Madison), Nancy Rose Hunt (History and African Studies, University of Florida), and Florence Bernault (History, Sciences Po [Paris]), three took place. The fourth, composed mostly of scholars based on the continent was cancelled. Consult the Program for that meeting to appreciate the topical and intellectual diversity represented on the Roundtables. It is elegant testimony to the extraordinary range and depth of Vansina's participation in learning, teaching, and writing about Africa. The Roundtables were not intended as memorials. Vansina made clear toward the close of his life that he did not want people gathering in public to pay him homage. We tried, a little, to honor those wishes. *History in Africa* sponsored the Roundtable on "Crafting Early African Histories," that generated the essays published here. Each paper touches on one part of that *œuvre*: Vansina's work on pre-colonial or early African history.

The vague phrase "Early African History" frees authors and audience alike from the teleology declared in the more conventional "Precolonial African History." The nationalist and Pan-Africanist projects of Africa's twentieth century gave a powerful punch to "precolonial African history," rebuking the centrality to colonial reinventions of Africa as a historyless place.² Despite the colonial creation of real and imagined parallel universes for colonized and colonizer, we have long known the boundaries between them, like boundaries between slave and master, were shaped by struggle, including evasion and creative theft of professed but impaired European civilizational precepts.³

Historians of "early" Africa need not orient their stories to European imperialism, even if the effects of struggles over imperialism and colonialism

¹ Michele Wagner, "Obituary – Jan Vansina (14 September 1929 – 8 February 2017)," *History in Africa* 44 (2017), 5–9.

² Jacob A. Àjàyí, "The Continuity of African Institutions Under Colonialism," in: Terence O. Ranger (ed.), *Emerging Themes of African History* (Dar es Salaam: East African Publishing House, 1968), 189–200; Peter Ekeh, "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17–1 (1975), 91–112.

³ Frederick Cooper, *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 66–89; Nancy R. Hunt, *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Reverie* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2016), chapter 2.

shape parts of our archive and echo through our reading publics.⁴ Early histories often reveal instead struggles over belonging and mobility that might be called vernacular imperialisms and colonialisms.⁵ Their histories provincialize some elements of more recent, continental colonialisms, by noting common threads and differences. The violent edge of Europe's imperial project in Africa interrupted some of those vernacular imperialisms.⁶

Despite such echoes and continuities with the recent past, the often-sweeping scope of the early African history narratives can feel cold. It resists a reader's projection of self into the story by hiding the individual initiative that drove generational levels of change and continuity in the past. Vansina met this challenge head-on, helping readers appreciate the ways in which people's aspirations and the forces limiting their pursuit of them shaped his narratives. He tracked the incremental accumulation of the consequences, intended or not, of pursuing aspiration in particular ways. He captured the ruptures that can create new awareness of change and continuity for African actors, reshaping their understandings of aspiration. These literary conventions of writing history should be familiar to scholars steeped in the written word and surrounded by things and places easily pinned down in a fine-grained chronology.

Africans have long been writers, with scripts and other graphic systems.⁷ Yet, much of Africa's long history, like other histories, belongs to times and places beyond literacy. Writing such histories during and after continental colonialism carries a tang of political struggle over methodology, chronology, and the epistemological standing of the resulting narratives. Vansina shaped such struggles with a respect for disciplines, probing the holes in their fences, embracing particular narrative forms and thematic topographies. Vansina sometimes displayed an interdisciplinary

⁴ Today's fascination with globality and connection is a common echo heard after imperial expansions. See: Ann B. Stahl, "Africa in the World: (Re)centering African History Through Archaeology," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 70–1 (2014), 5–33.

⁵ Moses Ochonou, *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2014).

⁶ Richard Reid, *A History of Modern Uganda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 284ss., argues the legacies of those interruptions shaped the struggles, accommodations, and collaborations with colonialism in key ways.

⁷ Paulo F. de Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: Epigraphy, Chronicles, and Songhay-Tuareg History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for The British Academy, 2003); John Kinahan, "A Ritual Assemblage from the Third Millennium B.C. in the Namib Desert and its Implications for the Archaeology and Rock Art of Shamanic Performance," *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 53–1 (2018), 40–62; Geoffroy Heimlich, "The Anthropology and History of Rock Art in the Lower Congo in Perspective," *Antiquity* 353 (2016), 1270–1285.

rhetoical style meant to re-establish proper boundaries between them.⁸ The impulse to provoke, inspire, and control all at once could produce the orneriness that Kairn Klieman mentioned in her wonderful Roundtable account of Vansina's influence on her transformative history of West Central Africa.⁹

The interdisciplinarian Vansina provoked historians of the earlier African past to relentlessly weigh the strengths and weaknesses of their source base. As Vansina often argued, each source reveals different aspects of meaning, motive, and people's positions in a socio-environmental milieu, leaving openings best filled by historical imagination. The methodological stakes were high because the narratives they supported promised to erase the denial of coevalness that Fabian argued long ago was central to colonial projects of making difference in order to rule.¹⁰ Vansina shared with African scholars an attention to method that allows today's cohort of scholars to concentrate on telling those stories.

The Creative Destruction of Interdisciplinary Tensions

Shadreck Chirikure (Archaeology and History, University of Cape Town) applies a critical comparative approach to the history of state formations in Southern Africa. Working in a team, Chirikure revises a neat master narrative of a chronologically discrete succession of southeastern African states, from Mapungubwe, to Great Zimbabwe, to Khami.¹¹ Chirikure's team reveals instead that concentrations of wealth and population overlapped in time producing a sequence of coexisting centers. The new story suggests

⁸ Jan Vansina, "Bantu in the Crystal Ball, I," *History in Africa* 6 (1979), 287–333; Jan Vansina, "Bantu in the Crystal Ball, II," *History in Africa* 7 (1980), 293–325; Jan Vansina, "Is Elegance Proof? Structuralism and African History," *History in Africa* 10 (1983), 307–348. Well aware of the pain his critique would inflict on De Heusch and others in their circle, Vansina explained himself in fn 8 "I am much loath to undertake this; we have been friends for thirty years. Yet exercises of the kind of *Rois nés* [*au Coeur de vache*] leads to great waste of intellectual effort. This constrains me to undertake this critique, not so much of *Rois nés* but of the structuralist 'method' in general." See also: Jan Vansina, "Historians, Are Archaeologists Your Siblings?," *History in Africa* 22 (1995), 369–408; Jan Vansina, "Is a Journal of Method Still Necessary?," *History in Africa* 36 (2009), 421–438.

⁹ Kairn Klieman, *The Pygmies Were Our Compass: Bantu and Batwa in the History of West Central Africa, Early Times to c. 1900 C.E.* (Portsmouth NH: Heinemann Publishers, 2003).

¹⁰ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

¹¹ Shadreck Chirikure, Munyaradzi Manyanga, Innocent Pikirayi and Mark Pollard, "New Pathways to Sociopolitical Complexity in Southern Africa," *African Archaeological Review* 30 (2013), 339–366.

that political cultures – the moral and hierarchical arrangements through which people allocate knowledge, social ties, and material resources – varied over time and space. Accounting for “polycentric” struggles which produced further changes in the geography of political cultures have yet to be parsed with histories of gender ideologies, generational tensions, alliance and consumer practice, and so forth. Rather than focusing on transitions between stages of political centralization, historians must now address the values and ambitions driving peer-polity interaction.

It is a deceptively simple move with enormous consequences for the shape of research into the history of the Zimbabwe plateau before the eighteenth century. Polycentrism raises questions about relations between particular centers of authority on the Plateau with other centers in the wider region. Different parts of the Zimbabwe plateau were linked at different times to communities in the Eastern Kalahari, at Bosutswe, Kaitshàa, Toutswe, and Tsodilo, across the Zambezi, at Ingombe Ilede, and across the Limpopo-Shahe valleys, in the lands becoming Nguni-speaking just as Mapungubwe took shape.¹² The Zimbabwe plateau region from the eighth to the eighteenth centuries now feels ready for fresh critical comparative engagement with new thinking on consumer culture, gender relations, exchange dynamics, and concentrations of artisanal production on all sides.

Chirikure blended a kind of autoethnography with archaeological excavation to arrive at this new narrative of early political culture, attentive to variability and to the family resemblances among early states in the region. Polycentric state formations push back on a progressive narrative of concentrated political power. In South Africa, this work bridges divides between community and academic revision to the region’s history and the selection of topics to be studied. Chirikure and colleagues have applied academic methods to generate a set of topics of abiding interest to lay intellectuals.¹³

Peter Robertshaw takes up this tension between academic and lay intellectual African histories. He emphasizes that the turn to heritage studies in

¹² James Denbow, Carla Klehm and Laure Dussubieux, “The Glass Beads of Kaitshàa and Early Indian Ocean Trade into the far Interior of Southern Africa,” *Antiquity* 89 (2015), 361–377; James Denbow, “A New Look at the Later Prehistory of the Kalahari,” *Journal of African History* 27–3 (1986), 3–28; Kathryn M. de Luna, *Collecting Food, Cultivating People: Subsistence and Society in Central Africa* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 173–193, for the involvement of Tsodilo Hills communities in this period; Susan Keech McIntosh and Brian M. Fagan, “Re-dating the Ingombe Ilede Burials,” *Antiquity* 91 (2017), 1069–1077; Raevin F. Jimenez, “Rites of Reproduction: Gender, Generation and Political Economic Transformation among Nguni Speakers of Southern Africa, 8th–19th Century CE,” PhD dissertation, Northwestern University (Evanston IL, 2017).

¹³ Webber Ndoro, Shadreck Chirikure and Jeanette Deacon, *Managing Heritage in Africa: Who Cares?* (London: Routledge, 2017).

Africa is often defensive, meant to protect the particularity of local history against the loss of dignity and visibility threatened by today's forms of globalization. The chronological weight of archaeological sites offers important responses. Current community interest in earlier histories of states often relies on the accessibility of that topic, blending local goals of visibility with the tourist's interest in the history of an institution that host and visitor share. Of course, states are not the only medium for developing such shared interests and accessibility can compress difference and creativity.

The dangers of compression lurk in the great promise of accessible stories about migration and displacement carried by anthropological genetics and its integration into early African history's conventional menu of sources. Just one example illustrates the risks of accessibility and the rewards of historical imagination. For a century and half scholars have searched for the shape, causes, and consequences of the expansion of the Bantu languages. A consensus has now emerged on the classification of those languages.¹⁴ At the same time, broader samples of different sorts of DNA evidence provide a richer picture of Africa's connections to distant corners of the globe, long before anyone speaking a Bantu language had shown up in central Africa and points south and east.¹⁵ This diverse picture of a continent connected to other continents by populations on the move, mixing, and displacing or replacing those already present, evokes familiar images. Migration, dispersal, and assimilation inside continental Africa are common features of both oral traditions and colonial histories.¹⁶ They are central tropes in the language of belonging and mobility. Yet, new images of connections to Asia and Europe and between regions of Africa disrupt once and for all any notion of Africa as a continent with a history apart, until books and ships, of sea or sand, broke its shell.

As Robertshaw suggests, the new picture forces us to rethink the complexities of the social and cultural histories of the groups encountered by Bantu-speakers as they moved through the Inner Congo Basin, and beyond, before the last millennium BCE. Historians must revisit the stubborn

¹⁴ Rebecca Grollemund *et al.*, "Bantu Expansion Shows That Habitat Alters the Route and Pace of Human Dispersals," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (U.S.) 112–43 (2015), 13296–13301; Christopher Ehret, "Bantu History: Big Advance, Although with a Chronological Contradiction," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (U.S.) 114–44 (2015), 13428–13429.

¹⁵ Pontus Skoglund *et al.*, "Reconstructing Prehistoric African Population Structure," *Cell* 171 (2017), 59–71.

¹⁶ The odious colonial use of African oral traditions to refuse African claims of firstness, justify imperial claims to land, and underpin colonial civilizational projects comes to mind. See: Peter Geschiere and Francis Nyamnjoh, "Capitalism and Autochthony: The Seesaw of Mobility and Belonging," *Public Culture* 12–2 (2000), 423–452; Norman Etherington, "Barbarians Ancient and Modern," *American Historical Review* 116–1 (2011), 31–57.

tendency to connect discrete material cultural traditions to discrete language worlds. For decades, archaeologists have been reminding any linguistically inclined historian willing to listen that archaeological sites and objects do not disclose the language(s) spoken by their makers. For just as long, historical linguists have revealed many examples of early and ongoing multilingual worlds of speech. Putting these together suggests more complex language worlds – some parts of which are gone forever, some of which live on in bundles of lexical transfers, or loanwords – behind stories of pottery traditions, metallurgy, and so forth. The environments inhabited by the people who made archaeological materials must include the sounds of different languages forming multilingual groups of artisans. That way, resources of knowledge, skill, and learning conveyed by language will allow us to rethink the complexities of archaeological assemblages in new ways.¹⁷ Archaeological attention to technological style, in turn, holds open the possibility of materializing that diversity of networks of knowledge, partly carried by language.¹⁸ The hunger to fill the empty scholarly time of Africa's past, in order to fit it into chronologies from elsewhere, perhaps made us too eager to suppress variability, to accept a pot as a metonym for a social whole, infused with the life of language. Reimagining bodies of archaeological material together with multiple speech communities will reveal Africa's earlier history – say, the millennia between 2000 BCE and 1000 CE – to have been far more complex than even the most nuanced studies so far produced, many by Vansina himself, have explored. We who teach and write from departments of history have archaeologists and anthropological geneticists to thank for that.

Kate de Luna is one of those scholars. She is a historian of southcentral Africa, a region Vansina was involved with for many decades. In keeping with the category of aspiration that Vansina made so central to his historical thinking, de Luna fleshes out the figure of the individual, an affective quarry whose aspirations manifest in unusual or variable archaeological evidence. Her work shows the impressions of a close collaboration with archaeologists because she attends to the inferential opportunities afforded by the concreteness of archaeological evidence. The interdisciplinary technique reduces the uniformity and anonymity of historical linguistic lexical

¹⁷ Mary McMaster, "Language Shift and its Reflection in African Archaeology: Cord Rouletting in the Uele and Interlacustrine Regions," *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 40–1 (2005), 43–72.

¹⁸ Stahl, "Africa in the World," 22; Neil Kodesh, "Networks of Knowledge: Clanship and Collective Well-Being in Buganda," *Journal of African History* 49–2 (2008), 197–216; Olivier P. Gosselain, "The World is Like a Beanstalk: Historicizing Potting Practice and Social Relations in the Niger River Area," in: Andrew P. Roddick and Ann B. Stahl (eds.), *Knowledge in Motion: Constellations of Learning Across Time and Place* (Tucson AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 36–66.

reconstructions and brings the figure of the person – as an individual – into the scope of historical narratives about early Africa.

In a long collaboration with the archaeologist Jeffrey Fleisher at Rice University, de Luna has taken up archaeological evidence and practice. They connect the variability of archaeological features with domains of meaning arguably in play in the same time and place. The aim is away from correlating or associating archaeology's larger-scale material cultural traditions with historical linguists' proto-lexicons. Instead, they bring historical actors into the minds of readers by finding the unique things actors tried out in the past. The example she sketches emerges from thinking about a unique archaeological feature: two houses, built over the course of a few generations, soon after the turn of the eleventh century CE, one on top of the other, each with a pit dug into its floor. While pits are common features, these particular pits were filled with the bones of two kinds of antelope. At the other places where archaeologists have found pits, none of them contained the bones of these two antelope. The preponderance of evidence makes these two pits unique.

When these antelope bond and reproduce, they forage in the territory in which the male grew into maturity, the female learning about a variation on the landscape of her youth. Anthropologists call that kind of residence pattern virilocal. The householders may have used the antelopes as a concrete mirror of this kind of living arrangement in their own lives, perhaps ennobling it with a temporal depth, an antiquity meant to express the hope that, if successful, the next generation of adults would follow in a mother's footprints, learning about the new opportunities and challenges around a father's people's place, but connecting the two through her own living.¹⁹ De Luna suggests strongly that this was a new arrangement. Speakers of one set of the region's Bantu languages had invented a suite of new words describing this kind of residential practice, favoring unions between cross-cousins. De Luna reminds us to think of marriage, kinship, and inheritance first as strategies and experiments in making political economy, before they become hegemonic systems shaping aspiration. With these warnings in mind, she applies her historical imagination to the presence of the antelope bones beneath these houses. The houses were built on an upland plateau, a different environment from the riverside, valley-bottom home of the community of speakers who invented the new suite of terms related to cross-cousin marriages in which couples settled near the man's family. By putting all of these innovations together, the two pits come into focus as experiments with new forms of marriage and residence, in an environment new to women who were figuring out how to make all of that work, in part, by enlisting the beings and bones of those two kinds of antelopes.

¹⁹ See also the articles on multispecies history, in particular Schoenbrun and Johnson's (this issue).

This sort of work aligns with Vansina's attention to the riches of materiality, the experience of living with Africa, the discipline of respecting what different kinds of evidence reveal, and the creativity to mix them properly, in accessible and satisfying accounts. The scope is broader still. In a juxtaposition familiar to historians, the narrow, telling detail or scene, set off against what is well-known or taken for granted, by both past actors and their scholars, provides a means to interpret DNA evidence with greater historical specificity. Such scenes provide a sense of the values and aspirations, rivalries, loss, and ambition behind the sex DNA evidence reflects. Those categories are filled in by archaeological and linguistic evidence reflecting elements of actors' categories that must guide the interpretations of DNA evidence. At the deeper temporal removes anthropological geneticists may reach with their methods, access to that rich weave of practice, aspiration, moral imagination, and so forth must be sought if only to restrain using anachronistic conceptual language in translating the shifting shape of genes into the stories people want to wring from them.²⁰

Colleen Kriger explores Vansina's deep engagement with material culture in her return to Vansina's first historical relationship with Africa: the past of the Kuba kingdom. Kriger discusses an anvil that was made from metals and techniques developed in Kuba smithies at different times, some of which came from distant sources. The anvil's material complexities expressed a technological and social history of metallurgy, mobility, and trade over many centuries and regions. Kriger uses the anvil to show us the ways in which Vansina's methodology pushed beyond both shallow time depths and hermetically sealed ethnic boxes, locked in place.

Vansina had a career-long fascination with Kuba history. Peers and younger scholars alike, including Kriger herself, repeatedly induced his "restless and insatiable mind" to expand his base of sources. Kriger tells us that habit drew on two obvious sources. First, Vansina's deep knowledge of Kuba places, persons, and stories meant he could test his interpretations of their histories, over and over as new material emerged. Second, the dynamic intellectual practice embodied in that testing kept the field of debate over the course and contents of a Kuba past open for others to join and shift. Both sources refused the rest of the world's tenacious forgetting of African history. Like the community-based approaches to archaeology Robertshaw mentioned, these practices involved Africans in debates over what African history should address, based on their sense of what the past might offer in meeting urgent realities in the present.

²⁰ Shomarka O. Y. Keita, "History in the Interpretation of the Pattern of p49a, f *TaqI* RFLP Y-Chromosome Variation in Egypt: A Consideration of Multiple Lines of Evidence," *American Journal of Human Biology* 17 (2005), 559–567; David L. Schoenbrun, "Mixing, Moving, Making, Meaning: Possible Futures for Africa's Distant Past," *African Archaeological Review* 29–3 (2012), 293–317, 300–303.

Kruger celebrates Vansina's use of material and visual culture as sources for appreciating a fully three-dimensional African historical actor. The competitions for prestige and status that so often underlay his explorations of cause and consequence in economic and political transformations often turned on visual economies marking title-holders. Objects brought to life the claims a title holder made to would-be clients and competitors. Such objects are sources of information for academic historians because they were secondary sources, versions of the past serving the interests of a community of users and beholders with well-developed aesthetic connoisseurship. The possession and display of finely made objects breathed life into the oral sources of reputation beneath the fortunes of a political career. Learning how to view the anvil and the wooden cups that Kruger discusses is an exercise in learning African history from their makers and users. Vansina's ability to bring such depth and life to objects, the skill and wit of their makers, the hopes and wealth of their patrons, and the discerning range of viewers and audiences has compelled others to attain a similar blend of empirical detail and historical imagination.

Conclusion

Kruger singles out the riches of Vansina's use of the method of "words and things" for African history, particularly its ability to amplify the material and visual culture in Kuba history. The method itself emerged late in the nineteenth century, in a European swirl of commodified print culture yoking language and nationalism in "unified fields of exchange and communication," that fostered an accessible notion of the speech community.²¹ Beginning in the mid-1960s, a younger generation of guild historians of Africa, pushed by Christopher Ehret, applied the method to writing African histories outside the racialized frames used by their predecessors.²² The political importance to academic African history of Vansina's convictions that Kuba oral traditions could be subjected to source-criticism just like medieval dirges, is justly famous. Others were thinking similar thoughts at

²¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), 43–46, 44; David L. Schoenbrun, "Words, Things, and Meaning: Linguistics as a Tool for Historical Reconstruction," in: Gerrit Dimmendaal and Rainer Vossen (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of African Languages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), forthcoming.

²² Christopher Ehret, "The Southern Nilotes to 1600 A.D.: A Linguistic Approach to East African History," PhD dissertation, Northwestern University (Evanston IL, 1969). For earlier practitioners, see: Wilhelm H.I. Bleek, *A Comparative Grammar of South African Languages Part I: Phonology* (Cape Town, 1862), vii; Saul Dubow, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); David L. Schoenbrun, "Representing the Bantu Expansions: What's at Stake?" *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34–1 (2001), 1–4.

that cusp between the colonial and what was to come. Bethwell Ogot worked with politically dispersed Luo-language traditions, pushing the fruits of oral traditions as history in new directions beyond Vansina's focus on centralized polities.²³ According to Hudson Liyai, Ogot developed his convictions with a sketchy knowledge of Vansina's work, which was then available only in French, a language in which Ogot then apparently lacked facility. Ogot drew inspiration from his Master's work at St. Andrews University, on Scottish clan histories, which he recognized as written versions of oral traditions.²⁴ Very shortly after that, Ehret expressed his own convictions that the comparative study of Africa's languages could produce lexical-semantic evidence receptive to source-criticism. In the mid-1960s, Vansina traveled from Madison to run a weekly seminar for the cohort of PhD candidates then writing about the African past in Northwestern's History Department under the supervision of scholars like John Rowe. Inspired by Vansina's insistence on finding historical actors and their aspirations behind oral traditions, through applying rules of evidence, Ehret sought to do the same for semantic change and continuity and for sets of loanwords transferred from one speech community into another. These stories underscore Vansina's membership in a rich community of scholars and intellectuals, in Africa and in the Global North. Their repercussions echo in the essays below.

Each essay foregrounds a tension in Vansina's work between empiricism and story-telling. The effects of new research shape his stories and his stories have influenced the shape of research. That tension grew out of – and was continually revitalized by – Vansina's talking with Africans and living with Africa. Putting things this way, I do not mean to essentialize Africa as a “source” – of authenticity, evidence, or audience – but to underscore the liveliness of exchange between a story's setting and the labor of generating the evidence a story sweeps up, sorts, and spreads out in description, analysis, and imagination. As distinctive as Vansina's practice was, it shared much with earlier scholar-story-tellers, whether the learned singers of dirges in Flanders, the tellers of Kuba histories, or the master narrators of Bantu expansions. Vansina was always pleased to pass that along to a new generation of scholar-story-tellers of Africa's past. The politics shaping Vansina's empiricism and narrative shifted with the close of colonialism,

²³ Jan Vansina, *Living With Africa* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 127; Bethwell A. Ogot, “Migration and Settlement among the Southern Luo Peoples, 1500–1900: A Case of Oral Tradition as a Historical Source,” PhD dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies (London, 1965), published as Bethwell A. Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo: Volume 1, Migration and Settlement, 1500–1900* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967).

²⁴ Hudson A. Liyai, “Bethwell A. Ogot: A Bio-Bibliography,” *Africana Journal* 17 (1998), 332–362, 336–337.

the opening of nationalist hope, it's foundering, and with the resurgence of African visibility and audibility through Nollywood, Iroko, and musical and literary form. As Robertshaw and Chirikure both suggest, those stories and the bodies of evidence they engage will increasingly be told by Africans to other Africans.²⁵ As Kriger and de Luna suggest, we must continue Vansina's salutary compulsion to revise narratives and refocus research agendas. It is fair to hope with them that the conversations within the continent and beyond will continue to grow and fray, as they imagine a future in which Africa's deeper past is as complex and strange, as familiar and intelligible, as instructive and flawed, as any other.

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²⁵ See also: Shadreck Chirikure, "Heritage Conservation in Africa: The Good, the Bad, and the Challenges," *South African Journal of Science* 109–1/2 (2013), 1–3.

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